

THE LICK CREEK SETTLEMENT: AN INDIANA NINETEENTH CENTURY BIRACIAL COMMUNITY

On Oct. 28, 1871, a group gathered at the Thomas household to attend an auction of the estate of Matthew Thomas, who died almost a year earlier. Mary Thomas, his wife, died three years before. This was an African-American family living about 30 miles north of the Ohio River in what is now called the Lick Creek settlement, a biracial agricultural community that was founded, flourished, then mostly abandoned within a span of about 50 years. The Thomas family, and others like it, had been the reason for the success of this settlement by clearing and placing hundreds of acres of steeply dissected southern Indiana upland forests into cultivation and creating viable and, in many cases, prosperous farmsteads. The farms were settled during a time when the absence of the possession of a piece of paper upon traveling outside one's community could immediately strip the freedom of an individual of African descent. The reality of this situation for African-American residents of the Lick Creek community was compounded by the existence of slavery in Kentucky just 30 miles to the south.

Most African-Americans who settled in southern Indiana during the early 19th century migrated from North Carolina and Virginia, where quality land was becoming increasingly scarce. In addition, oppressive laws and racist attitudes within many of the communities were growing at an alarming rate. These laws, called Black Codes, stripped voting rights and the movement of individuals between counties and states. They also bound children out as involuntary apprentices and threatened bondage at the first hint of vagrancy. Many free third and fourth generation African-American farmers within these southern communities were left with no prospect of increasing their land holdings for the first time in decades and experienced a severe erosion of civil rights. This increasingly harsh climate was responsible for much of the migration out of North Carolina and Virginia.

As a result, African-American migration into Indiana greatly increased in the 1830s. As settlements primarily founded by recently displaced African-Americans became better established and successful, more settlers were encouraged to enter the state. However, supply and demand resulted in the escalation of land prices within popular settlement areas, causing further migration into other communities that still possessed good land at reasonable prices. By 1850, African-Americans lived in all but six of 92 Indiana counties. By 1860, Indiana hosted more than 20 separate agricultural settlements, occupied primarily by African-American residents, in mostly the southern and eastern portions of the state.

Account of the sale of the personal property of
 "Elias Roberts" deceased sold by Harrison Bobbitt
 Admr at the late residence of the decedent at
 public auction on the 24th day of Aug. 1866.

No	Names of Articles	Sold for	To whom sold
1	Set of plates	14 50	Nettie Ann Graves
2	One shot gun	3 50	Matthew Thomas
3	One Burehu	5 00	Thomas Burnett
4	One quill wheel	30	Granvil Payton
5	One big wheel	2 20	William Noblitt
6	One fallen leaf table	1 55	Nancy Roberts
7	Candle molds	15	Thomas Thompson
8	One Safe	3 15	Granvil Payton
9	Two Skittles & 2 Lids	1 10	Simon Jones
10	One Stew-kettle	35	Matthew Thomas
11	One Oven & 2 Lids	45	Thomas Thompson
12	One Churn	25	Granvil Payton
13	One Bucket	10	Jerry Thomas
14	Half bushel	10	William Stout
15	One Washboard	35	Isaac Ervin
16	One Two-inch auger	30	John E. Walling
17	One 3/4 inch Auger	36	William Noblitt
18	One 1/2 inch Auger	25	Matthew Thomas
19	Ten gallon Keg	1 10	Samuel Lindley
20	Lot of Iron trunks	26	W. B. Tuxey
21	One Norwich (Iron)	50	Samuel Lindley
22	One Oven & 2 Lids	25	David Wade
23	One Lard Keg	70	William Noblitt

One such community was the Lick Creek settlement, located just a few miles southeast of Paoli in Orange County. Although, the settlement has been known by many names locally, the name of Lick Creek, derived from a small stream that runs westward through the area, has remained. In May 1831, Matthew Thomas was the first African- American to buy land (80 acres) within the settlement area. He purchased the property after he had completed an eight-year apprenticeship for what appears to have been farming under the direction of a nearby Quaker named Zachariah Lindley. The following year, three more African-American families migrated from North Carolina and bought 40 acres each just

south of the town of Chambersburg, establishing the first concentration of African-American land holdings for the now burgeoning community. The lands south of Chambersburg were heavily wooded and hilly, making the establishment of a farmstead a difficult task. Nevertheless, the settlement expanded and remained mostly centralized and eventually included the Union Meeting House and an African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.) by the early 1840s; both buildings were used for a combination of religious and educational purposes. Before this period, it is believed that schooling and religious services were held at various households within the community.

Although African-American landowners tended to purchase contiguous tracts of land with one another, non-African-American ownership of land within these settlements was typically intertwined. Neighbors, be they black or white, Quaker or Methodist, shared all of the common labors of the day, such as threshing, harvesting, planting, butchering, and even numerous civic duties. The vast majority of settlement inhabitants were farmers; however, many pursued other occupations on the side, especially during downtimes within the farming calendar. These extracurricular jobs helped solidify community relations, as well as further encourage interaction beyond that of social obligations.

By 1850, approximately 250 African-Americans lived within every township of Orange County. However, a vast majority of residents settled in Paoli and South East townships, which encompassed much of the Lick Creek Settlement. At the height of the community in 1855, African-American landowners held 1,557 acres. Additionally, during this same period, most Lick Creek residents had been born in Indiana; after 1850 few arrived from other states. Certainly this was due in part to Indiana State House legislation barring African-Americans of continued entrance into the state.

In the years after 1860, families began to leave the settlement, beginning a 50-year period of population decline. The community's most profound exodus came in September 1862, when seven African-American families sold all of their land, totaling 539 acres. By 1880, only six African-American families owned land within the area, although most agricultural parcels were probably not all under cultivation due to the lack of available labor. Ten years later, only William Thomas, the son of Matthew Thomas, the first settlement landowner, was still tilling the soil. William Thomas sold his remaining 204 acres in 1902, moving outside of the settlement, closer to the county seat of Paoli. John Chavis was the last African-American to own property within the Lick Creek community, selling his land in 1911.



Matthew Thomas home site in Hoosier National Forest showing a few foundation stones of the domestic structure

In 1935, the United States government purchased the settlement land and incorporated it into the Hoosier National Forest. It is believed that upon the acquisition of these lands by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service, any remaining structures, including settlement cabins, were most likely removed due to safety and potential squatting concerns. Archaeological sites within the boundaries of the settlement now consist of rock piles from chimney falls, sporadic foundation stones, overgrown farm roads, fence lines, and surface/subsurface artifacts. Detection of these sites is not always apparent. The most visible remnant of the Lick Creek community is the cemetery, which was located near the prior location of the Union Meeting House and the A.M.E. church. It is the one distinct piece of evidence that a community once existed, with weathered headstones displaying the names of a number of the settlement's 19th-century residents.

Since 1999, the United States Forest Service, Ball State University, Indiana University, and the Indiana State Museum have conducted a variety of archaeological investigations that have involved surface and subsurface reconnaissance, test excavations and geophysical research. At least 30 sites have been located at various stages of preservation, many of which have been determined eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. Recovered materials have included highly decorated ceramic tableware, a scroll flask, a cup plate, pencils, gun parts, munitions, harmonica parts, marbles, sewing machine parts, and a variety of butchered animal bones. In addition, historic documentation, particularly that of probate inventories and agricultural census records, which is used in conjunction with archaeological data, provides an added dimension for research. These types of studies address aspects of behavior and cultural identity, as well as the level and type of community interaction for particular families within the settlement.

Now, as part of the Hoosier National Forest, the Lick Creek settlement is nestled among stands of native hardwoods , and while little remains upon the surface, multiple-use recreational trails offer access to this historic Indiana landscape. Future investigations in the area will continue to address and possibly shed light upon this little known, yet important chapter of Indiana history.



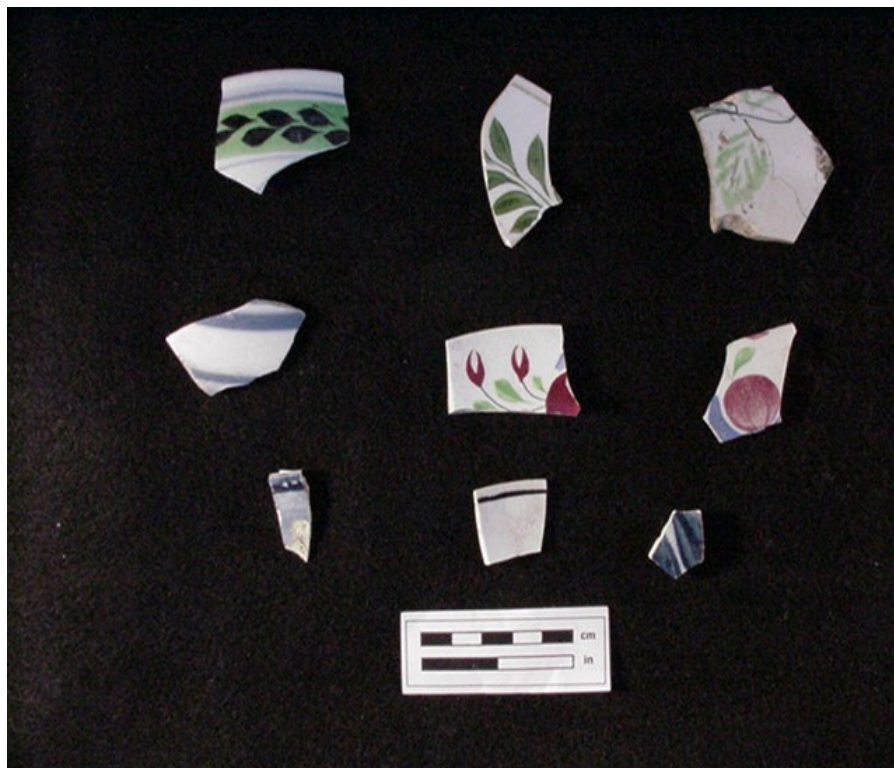
Abandoned wagon road just east of the Thomas family home site



Matthew Thomas site excavation of domestic structure (2001 excavation)



Decorated ceramics recovered from Thomas home site



Handpainted whiteware recovered from Thomas family home site



Eating utensils recovered from Thomas family home site



Liberty-head penny 183? Recovered from Thomas family home site



Various bottle fragments recovered from Thomas family home site

Consulted Sources and Further Reading:

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